



myriad intimacies ▼ lata mani

myriad intimacies

BUY

lata mani ▼

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



# myriad intimacies

**DUKE**

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS Durham and London 2022

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

© 2022 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Aimee C. Harrison

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mani, Lata, [date] author.

Title: Myriad intimacies / Lata Mani.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021035743 (print)

LCCN 2021035744 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478015659 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018278 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478022886 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Religion and culture. | Tantrism. | Ontology. | Social

justice. | Criticism—Political aspects. | BISAC: RELIGION / Spirituality

Classification: LCC BL65.C8 M3525 2022 (print) | LCC BL65.C8 (ebook) |

DDC 306.6—dc23/eng/20211021

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035743>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035744>

Cover art: Untitled, anonymous, near Udaipur, 1999. From *Tantra Song: Tantric Painting from Rajasthan*, edited by Franck André Jamme (Catskill, NY: Siglio Press), 2011.

DUKE  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

for  
all that I have been taught  
all that I have yet to learn

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

## contents

List of Videos	ix
Acknowledgments	xi

In your hands this book xiii

INTRODUCTION. Integral Entanglements,  
Formal Experiments 1

ONE. The COVID-19 Pandemic:  
A Tantric Invitation to Humanity 9

TWO. *The Nocturnes* with Nicolás Grandi 14

THREE. Speaking to the Sacred 18

FOUR. The Algorithm of Love 22

FIVE. *De Sidere 7* with Nicolás Grandi 23

SIX. Intimate Stranger 30

SEVEN. Tantra and the Body 31

EIGHT. To Bend into the Wind 34

NINE. Love Is Not a State of Exception 39

TEN. California Poppy 42

ELEVEN. “A Glorious Thing Made Up of Stardust”: What  
Pat Parker and Rohith Vemula Ask Us to Consider 43

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

TWELVE. Benediction	48
THIRTEEN. Objects in the Mirror Are Closer Than You Think: Beyond the Rhetoric of Otherness	49
FOURTEEN. <i>Words Fall into Empty Mind</i> with Nicolás Grandi	54
FIFTEEN. Does the Mind Have a Heart?	55
SIXTEEN. Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones . . . but Words? On Social Justice Rhetoric	58
SEVENTEEN. "What I Noticed Most Was That I Had Become a Poet": Renewing the Language of Politics	63
EIGHTEEN. Continual Evolution	68
NINETEEN. Am I Doing Enough? Crisis, Activism, and the Search for Meaning	69
TWENTY. The Tantra of Action	73
TWENTY-ONE. "We Inter Are": Identity Politics and #MeToo	77
TWENTY-TWO. A Malleable Border Teeming with Life	84
AFTERWORD	87
Out of the One Many	94
Dark Goddess	96
<i>In Silence the Mind Breathes</i> with Nicolás Grandi	97

References	99
------------	----

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



videos with nicolás grandi



ONE. *Nocturne I* 15



TWO. *Nocturne II* 17



THREE. *De Sidere* 7 25



FOUR. *Nota Bene: A Sutra  
in Four Scenes* 37

DU

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



FIVE. *Words Fall into  
Empty Mind* 54



SIX. *In Silence the  
Mind Breathes* 97

---

Videos can be accessed by scanning the QR Code below.



<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.5707808>

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

list of videos

## acknowledgments

WE CAN BE ONLY partially aware of all that has activated and sustained our work. For, in addition to what we know to have prompted reflection—current events, ongoing debates, reigning assumptions—there is the enigma of how the moon and stars, the tamarind and redwood trees, the chance remark and musical phrase impelled us to bring something flickering at the edge of consciousness to the center of our awareness. To this mystery I first bow.

As an endeavor not grounded in a single discipline or focused on one demarcatable question, *Myriad Intimacies* is located within multiple, overlapping conversations. Such a text is bound to exclude references to works that also belong within its citational universe. To the inevitability of this fact I add the following circumstance: I suffered a brain injury in 1993, which has made reading long articles and books virtually impossible. It has led me to work intuitively, from memory, observation, and contemplation rather than research and a close reading of texts, as I had previously done. Although I have learned from listening to subsequent scholarship via talks uploaded on the web, this process enables me to cite the broad contours of an argument, not its details. I invite readers to inscribe in the text's margins additional references that would extend and enrich the questions posed here.

I began the work collected in *Myriad Intimacies* in Bangalore, India, and completed it in Oakland, California. It interweaves my writing with my

DUKE  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

video collaborations with Nicolás Grandi. Nicolás and I met in Bangalore when he was teaching film and video at the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology. We started working together just as he was preparing to return to Buenos Aires. Our transoceanic partnership would have been impossible were it not for the synergy of our relationship and the possibilities unleashed by the internet. Working with Nicolás has nudged me to move beyond print in exploring the potential of transmedia experiments to pluralize perception. I thank all who have collaborated with us in our projects.

Early iterations of some of the material in *Myriad Intimacies* were presented at Goldsmiths, University of London, University of California, Los Angeles, University of California, Berkeley, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, University of Amsterdam, and Princeton University. I am grateful to my interlocutors at these events, for their comments served to hone my thinking.

Deepa Dhanraj listened at all hours, as did Sowmya Ramanathan who in addition graciously undertook impromptu requests for bibliographic assistance. My sisters, Meera and Sunita Mani, provided a home away from home. Avtar Brah, Indira Chowdhury, Vivek Dhareshwar, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Akhil Gupta, and Purnima Mankekar offered the sustenance of conversation and friendship. Bach, Handel, jazz, *slokas*, *dhrupad*, and Sufi music were the soundtrack of my days, with rock periodically stepping in to ground my energy. The unseen was a constant, sheltering presence.

Last but not least I thank Ken Wissoker for soliciting this manuscript and gently persuading me that it had a home at Duke University Press.



The following were initially guest posts on the online blog *Kafila*: “A Glorious Thing Made Up of Stardust: What Pat Parker & Rohith Vemula Ask Us to Consider,” February 19, 2016; “Am I Doing Enough? Crisis, Activism & the Search for Meaning,” March 14, 2016; “Sticks and Stones May Break my Bones . . . but Words? On the Rhetoric of Social Justice Activism,” April 1, 2016; “Objects in the Mirror are Closer Than You Think: Beyond the Rhetoric of Otherness,” November 12, 2017. “A Malleable Border Teeming with Life,” was first posted June 2, 2020, on the website *Solidarity and Care During the Covid-19 Pandemic*. “We Inter Are: Identity Politics & #MeToo” was published in *Feminist Review* 122, no. 1 (2019): 198–204. All are reprinted here with permission.

In your hand this book  
Object unto itself  
Essays Poems Process Notes  
Analytical Contemplative

This book in your hands  
An effect of your reading  
Juxtapositions sequences  
Encountered in print-duration  
Interleaving these  
Links to video experimentations  
Sensorial landscapes  
Temporal explorations

It is hoped that you will accept these  
As linked invitations  
To play & engage with  
Proposed interpretations

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## introduction ▼ integral entanglements, formal experiments

*Myriad Intimacies* is conceived as an offering. It comprises prose, poetry, and audiovisual explorations of the interrelatedness of lives, life forms, concepts, and frameworks. *Myriad Intimacies* is not an *intervention*, a term that implies pointed interjection in a stable, preconstituted domain of inquiry. Even when addressing issues with a rich discursive history—identity, otherness, political rhetoric—the approach is exploratory in order to enact ideas in the mode of address, to offer a cumulative experience of them by interleaving genres and forms. The word *offering* has a distinctly spiritual connotation. This association makes it especially appropriate because this collection moves freely, unapologetically, between registers that would be distinguished as “sacred” or “secular” and not customarily found within the covers of a single work. The method I adopt here was developed well before COVID-19, in whose shadow I completed the manuscript. But it seems especially apposite when the impact of the virus on every aspect of life means that the term *existential* was for once being collectively experienced in both its material and its philosophical sense.

We live and work in contexts in which a narrowly instrumental notion of knowledge is dominant. We are primarily addressed as *homo economicus*, and within that categorization as consumers first and foremost. What has manifested is a logic of proliferation within an increasingly narrow conception of possibilities and, relatedly, ever greater conformism masquerading

D

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

as affirmation of infinite potential and creativity. Even debates on the plurality and fluidity of identity have at times become entangled with these dynamics, multiplying categories rather than challenging their premises. Critique has become a commodity to be consumed. We are rarely addressed as philosophical beings engaged by broader questions of what it means to be human, though climate change and the intense precarity of neoliberalism have brought these issues into relief, a process further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprisings against racial injustice in the wake of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police.

The idea of the socio-natural world as an autonomous entity—one separable from the observer and awaiting cognitive capture by an objective researcher—has continued to prevail despite the cumulative and fatal challenges to it from multiple, overlapping directions: critical studies of science; critique of Enlightenment philosophy; feminism; new materialisms; quantum physics; indigenous epistemologies; postcolonial, race, and cultural studies. Several generations of scholars have contributed to these complex developments, including Jacqui M. Alexander (2006), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Karan Barad (2007), Rosi Braidotti (2013, 2019), Dipesh Chakravarty (2000, 2018), Marisol de la Cadena (2015), Arturo Escobar (2018), Stuart Hall (1996, 2019a, b), or Donna Haraway (1991, 2003, 2008, 2016), Bruno Latour (2017, 2018), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), Cherríe Moraga (2011; see also Moraga's 1981 publication with Anzaldúa), Elizabeth Povinelli (2016), Edward Said (1979), Isabelle Stengers (2010, 2011), and Anna Tsing (2015).

The compelling and forceful nature of the combined critique should have remade knowledge and put paid to the notion of objective universal truth. But the critique has been contained within certain disciplines, segregated into particular branches within disciplines, or accommodated by a softening of the borders of what is deemed permissible as an argument or the form in which it can be presented. For the most part, the dominant norms of power and authority have remained intact.

Genuine inquiry involves inhabiting a space between cognitive abeyance and cognitive freefall. Until, gradually, cumulatively, nonlinearly, and retroactively, one marshals conceptual and empirical resources to elucidate the intuitions that have prompted one's investigation. It is an unpredictable process that can require one to recast initial questions or even abandon them in order to travel in an altogether different direction. And yet scholarly protocol often obscures the very process by which knowledge comes

into being. Or else it only partially discloses it. The authoritativeness of a finished work can occlude the destabilizing uncertainty of inquiry. It can seem as though the argument was evident to the author and merely needed to be put down in order that it may be shared with others. Is it any wonder that an overly stable conception of knowledge is continually fortified?



The work gathered in *Myriad Intimacies* is grounded in the following propositions:

- We are sensuous beings inhabiting “infinity,” a continually evolving, multiply and mutually constituted field of interrelations. Our senses compose our material experience. We apprehend the world through them.
- We have at our disposal language that by its nature constrains our imagination even as it unleashes it.
- Any analytic effort can only trace some aspects of the manifold cause-and-effect interrelations that bear on the issue at hand. The omnipotent researcher with mastery over her object of study makes way for the modest explorer who is conscious of the rich specificity and partiality of her understanding.
- We are situated, sentient beings. The stories we tell locate us (Haraway 1988; Mohanty 1987).
- The idea of knowledge as capture is an untenable fiction and would do well to cede ground to knowing as a practice of attunement.

It might seem odd to name infinity as an interpretive horizon, because as humanists our work primarily addresses the social world. I invoke infinity as a way to alert us to the danger that the focus we are required to develop might lead us to forget that from a planetary perspective, from the purview of the cosmos, our work is irreducibly local. For we are thinking with/of/about particular specificities and their evolving, multiply constituted, embedded mutualities.

At the heart of my efforts to counter the inertia of present norms has been a rethinking of time, form, and structure. Time, form, and structure are closely interrelated, and what it means to experiment with them in writing and in video varies given the specificities of each medium. It has meant



rethinking “argument” as the dispersed cumulative effect of composing and arranging pieces so as to enable a polyphonic experience of key ideas. The essays are short by design so that the invitation to consider core propositions can be made gradually, evocatively, and severally via the forms that comprise a given work. But whereas my previous books, *SacredSecular: Contemplative Cultural Critique* (2009) and *The Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present* (2013), experimented with observational writing, poetry, and contemplative and analytical prose, *Myriad Intimacies* goes further by interweaving multigenre writing with videopoems and video-contemplations. Moving between genres and mediums organically disrupts normative expectations. The reader/viewer is continually repositioned in relation to the work and is required to adjust to shifts in language, focus, mood, and depth of perception. The form and structure make evident the processual nature of interpretation, and the linguistic and visual play it enables serves to unsettle representation as a forensic craft devoid of mystery.



*Myriad Intimacies* can be described as a narrative whole composed of fragments. *Fragment*, defined as remnant, portion, incomplete part, derives from the Latin *frangere*, to break.

Also from *frangere*:

*fraction* (a proportion of a whole number)

*fracture* (crack, break)

*fractious* (quarrelsome)

It might seem that portion, part, incompleteness, brokenness, and ill-temperedness are indelibly linked.

*Frangere*, however, is also the root for *fractal*. This fact brings into view a different, more expansive, dimension. A fractal is a geometric figure or natural phenomenon in which a repeated pattern can be observed at each scale of magnification. Such repetitions may be identical or to varying degrees self-similar. Mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot (1982) coined the term to redress the shortcomings of classical geometry in describing the complexity of a whole range of natural phenomena, among them snowflakes, trees, plants, river networks, and cardiovascular systems. Fractal patterns have since been observed in, and inspired the making of, art, image, sound, music.

Interpretation is an exercise in composition and framing. As I already noted, it involves noticing some things from among a near-infinite range of possibilities and striving to understand the relationships between them. One can neither “see everything” nor make sense of all of the interrelationships between what one beholds. By its nature interpretation is a continual, always partial, process of building from fragments and developing principles for moving between and among them. Fractals affirm the insights of contemplative teaching regarding the inseparability of part and whole. In the seed, the tree. Out of one, many. To contemplate is to observe closely, to understand through analysis and reflection, a process that is at once both outward and inward, as the world is first encountered within. Observation, analysis, reflection: forms of magnification that oscillate between proximity and distance, focusing in and then widening the frame.

Expansion, contraction: inhalation, exhalation. A “natural” rhythm but also one crucial to inquiry as sensuous dispassion: a fullness of presence that can activate a curiosity and hold habitual perception in check. Honoring this dynamic implies and requires a certain pacing in writing, structure, composition, editing. S-t-r-e-t-c-h-i-n-g time and e l o n g a t i n g attention to allow for the possibility of seeing anew, moving through cognitive and physical discomfort toward terra (as yet) incognita.

Although considered uniquely contemporary, transmedia and multi-genre explorations are arguably current iterations of an ancient pedagogy rooted in the premise that beings learn in accordance with their nature. It is for this reason that in Hindu-Buddhist traditions, the mandala or yantra (a geometric representation of the journey of the practitioner) has many doorways. It is assumed that each individual will enter through the portal most suited to them and navigate the labyrinth of inquiry in their own way. Thus, also in indigenous and other storytelling traditions one finds a plethora of stories, a proliferation of metaphors, accordion-like narrative structures that facilitate digression, interpolations, narrative recursivity, and so on. These forms are capacious enough for a spiritual or philosophical investigation, able to hold paradox, contradiction, and multiple valences.

A kaleidoscopic approach in which core ideas are explored in various distinct and overlapping ways is one means of responding to the crisis of perception we confront today. For it is not a paucity of information that accounts for an absence of fellow feeling but rather the absence of fellow feeling that estranges us from the facts and their implications. Fake news or information silos are merely a secondary manifestation of the severing of

the truth of our interrelatedness. This divisiveness and sense of separation are not merely problems of genre. Yet genre experiments are one means of embedding generosity and extending trust to the reader/viewer. To this end, *Myriad Intimacies* is intentionally crafted so relative autonomy exists in the relationships between elements, between chapters or sections, within chapters, and between kinds of writing and visual representation. Even though the book is meant to be grasped in its totality, each aspect or segment is not conceived as subsidiary and fully subsumable within it. Rather, each element exists in a dual sense: as itself and in particular relation to the work as a whole. This orientation enables me to be cognitively honest about sense-making as provisional synthesis, to trust readers/viewers to make their own way through the material, to navigate its surprises, its incompleteness, as they choose. In moving between different densities of expression, they can experience nonfiction as an encounter with multiple temporalities.

The analytical terms that frame this text are probably familiar to most readers—all, that is, barring one: *tantra*. As a term, *tantra* is found within the assemblage of ideas and practices designated today as “Hinduism” and in Buddhism. But as a philosophical orientation it is not unique to these traditions, and indeed, although present in them, not as widely practiced as one might wish. A brief introduction may thus be appropriate.

Tantra conceives the universe as sentient and all life forms within it as equal. This egalitarian assessment extends to all life activity as well. Tantra honors embodiment as sacred, the senses as a form of intelligence, and each living entity as existing in two interlinked triadic relationships: self-other-connectivity; self-other-divinity. To honor those who may be skeptical of the idea of spirit or divinity, when appropriate I substitute *laws of nature* for *laws of creation*. This substitution is not a concession, because within a tantric perspective the rest of nature unresistingly manifests the laws of creation. It is we humans who, endowed with free will, can choose whether or not to live by them. To coerce us to do so would be to violate the gift given to us.

I should clarify that the understanding of tantra on which I draw here is gleaned from a long-term practice of meditation and not from a scholarly study of Hindu-Buddhist tantric texts. In so doing I tread a path that reflects South Asian spiritual pedagogy, which is as rooted in insights derived from practice as in those arising from textual study, and in which texts themselves are understood to be post hoc compilations of wisdom yielded by practice. I will say more about tantra in the pages that follow but only

to an extent relevant to a text seeking to braid secular and spiritual inquiry and transcode between ways of knowing. Readers who are curious about the particular iteration of the philosophy that informs this work may turn to *The Tantra Chronicles*, a compendium of received teachings (Frankenberg and Mani, 2013). I hope this preliminary sketch has indicated why tantra might be relevant to a humanity fatally divided against itself and to a world battered by a disdain for nature. A world that, even through its bruising, spins steadily on its axis, inviting us to see it anew and in so doing renew ourselves and all that makes life possible.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

introduction